Regula Christiansen-Bolli


Introduction. Tadaksahak, spoken mainly in northeastern Mali by some 32,000 speakers (the Idaksahak, literally ‘sons of Isaac’, and their associates), is the largest language belonging to Northern Songhay¹ – a small group of closely related languages of the Sahel-Sahara region with a Songhay core vocabulary and basic grammar, but a lexicon overwhelmingly composed of Berber loans, bringing with them a good deal of Berber morphology. The fact that Tadaksahak causative and passive morphology is not only entirely Berber, but can only apply to Berber roots – forcing systematic suppletion of almost all inherited Songhay stems (Christiansen and Christiansen, 2002) – illustrates the extent of language contact, resulting in what some would define as mixed languages (Wolff and Alidou, 2001; Benítez-Torres, 2009). This is reflected in the typology (mixing prepositions and postpositions, pre- and post-nominal numerals, etc.) as well as in the vocabulary.

The development of Northern Songhay is not yet well-understood. Souag (fc.) proposes a scenario for its spread northwards to Tabelbala which suggests that Northern Songhay had already emerged some 800 years ago, giving ample time for contact effects to build up. However, why and when it came to be adopted by the Idaksahak, who probably originally spoke Berber, remains unclear. In addition to its obvious value as the first grammar of a very inadequately documented language, Christiansen-Bolli’s grammar provides vital data for understanding the contact-intensive development of this language and of the family to which it belongs.

Overview. The introduction presents a brief overview of the Idaksahak in context, including a helpful map, a brief discussion of their non-Tuareg origins (Jewish according to some of their neighbours, Moroccan Berber according to themselves) and their traditional function within Tuareg society as religious specialists (“marabouts”), and some notes on dialectal variation and the circumstances of fieldwork. It is followed by a discussion of the phonology, which, as Nicolaï (1979; 1981) noted, shows an interesting combination of Berber features (such as emphatics, schwa, and sibilant harmony) and Songhay features (such as phonemic vowel length and a voiceless palatal stop).

The most striking feature of the morphology, discussed in chapter 3, is the systematic suppletion found in diathesis morphology. The proto-Northern

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¹ For a hopefully comprehensive bibliography of the family, see https://sites.google.com/site/lameen/northern-songhay.
Songhay causative suffix -nda has been lost without trace; the only means of forming causatives is the Berber prefix s- (with various not entirely predictable allomorphs, along with vowel ablaut in the stem to which it is attached), and, with a few exceptions, this prefix can only be attached to Berber roots. Thus, for example, the causative from būbī ‘be black’ is š-akwal, based on a root found in Tuareg. The same is true of the reciprocal (expressed analytically elsewhere in Songhay) and the passive (which within Songhay presents difficulties for reconstruction). The Tadaksahak facts apparently generalise to its close relative Tagdal as well (Benítez-Torres, 2009). As elsewhere in Northern Songhay, shorter verbs are usually but not always borrowed with a prefix y-, apparently corresponding to the Berber 3m.sg. subject prefix. It is possible that the contrast is reconstructible for some subgroup of Northern Songhay: compare Tadaksahak kəmaš ‘to tie up... in corner of garment’ (p. 49) and Korandjé kʷmʷuš ‘to tie up in cloth’ with Tadaksahak y-iddár, Korandjé (y)i-ddza ‘to live’ (p. 293), both from Berber (Souag, 2010).

Nominal morphology too has been significantly complicated by Berber influence. Most nouns in the language take the Berber gender prefixes a-(m.sg.) / ta- (f.sg.), even though Tadaksahak has no gender agreement, and these prefixes have derivational uses to indicate size and gender. Whereas proto-Northern Songhay, like most Songhay languages today, probably had only a single clitic plural morpheme for noun phrases, Tadaksahak has four main plural classes, with several subclasses, often involving internal vowel change as well as affixation. Compounding has become quite unproductive, often supplanted by Berber derivational morphology. Postpositions are all inherited, while prepositions include at least two Berber loans. The grammar unfortunately does not discuss relational nouns, but as elsewhere in Songhay, they play an important role: cf. p. 190, tabákart en mó (sheep gen front) “in front of the sheep”, p. 245, gánda n cidáy ka (earth gen under at) “under the earth”.

The pronouns are much as in other Northern Songhay varieties, including the etymologically mysterious 2nd person plural ánä. Their syntax and morphology, however, contain some surprises. The pronoun separator n (p. 123), apparently a meaningless morpheme placed between adjacent pronouns (or rather between a pronoun and a following 3rd person pronoun?) to separate them, has only loose counterparts elsewhere in Songhay. The suppletive 2nd person dative ana has been retained from Songhay, unlike in Korandjé, and, unlike any other Tadaksahak dative pronouns, follows rather than precedes the direct object pronoun – as all dative pronouns do in most Songhay varieties. Most bizarrely, the instrumental/comitative preposition anda follows its complement when, and only when, the predicate to which it belongs also contains
a direct object (p. 127), a phenomenon which it would be nice to see more examples for.

Adjective morphology, naturally, combines Songhay and Berber elements (cf. Kossmann, 2011): many Songhay stative verbs form attributive adjectives in a Songhay manner (by zero derivation or adding a high vowel -i/u), whereas Berber ones take the Berber suffix -an, and many monosyllabic Songhay ones take the same suffix with reduplication, a combined strategy reported in neither language. All numerals above 2 are from Berber (although anomalous sound correspondences give reason to question Christiansen-Bolli’s assertion on p. 133 that “most numerals are of Tamasheq origin.”)

Chapter 4 – the longest in the book, at 129 pages – addresses the syntax, in laudable detail. The demonstrative system (p. 140ff) shows clear Tuareg influence in including six different morphemes, whereas most Songhay languages have only two (one spatial, one anaphoric); nevertheless, only one of these morphemes can be straightforwardly explained as a Tuareg loan, and some are etymologically problematic. Indeed, even the meanings of the demonstratives are not always fully clear – the function of ná, for example, is described in a manner that leaves me at least with little idea of what contexts to use it in (p. 145). Genitives with n precede the noun, but most other modifiers follow it. A morpheme aɣo, with cognates elsewhere in Northern Songhay and a distribution corresponding to Tuareg wa, is used in a variety of constructions, including demonstratives, characteristic modifiers, relative clauses, nominalised adjectives, and ordinals. Numerals 1–10 follow the noun, while ones higher than 10 precede it and are linked with the genitive particle n. Postpositions follow demonstratives and possessive phrases in wáni, but precede adjectives, numerals, and other modifiers (p. 159), contrasting with most other Songhay varieties. The aspect/mood/negation morphemes are entirely inherited from Songhay, but their usage shows some influence from Berber, notably in the hortative construction with a 1st person plural dative (p. 169) and the use of the same negator for subjunctive and imperfective forms (p.166; cp. Kossmann, 2004). The originally plural imperative marker ba ~ wa has, perhaps uniquely within the family, been extended to prohibitives and 3rd person injunctives irrespective of number (p. 168).

Argument structure (section 4.3) is discussed extensively. Labile verbs are common both in Songhay and in Berber, but have been extended under Songhay influence to many Berber borrowings that are not labile in Tuareg. Verbs taking a theme and a goal (p. 184) show an interesting alternation: both are unmarked if noun phrases, while a pronominal inanimate goal or animate destination are marked with the dative postposition se. A similar alternation with datives more generally, in which a first person pronoun takes no dative
postposition unless followed by another pronoun, is buried in the morphology section (p. 125). Four major types of clausal complementation are discussed: a verbal noun, which can in turn take oblique complements – a phenomenon atypical for Songhay, but with Tuareg parallels; a subjunctive subordinate clause (with ‘say’, ‘let’); a realis complement clause with subject-to-object raising / object control; and a full clause with the borrowed complementiser sa (p. 188ff).

Simple positive equational predication is handled by juxtaposition, as in Tuareg but not as in mainstream Songhay, and negated by the Berber loan wíjī ‘is not’ (cp. Tamasheq wārjen); in addition, several distinct presentational forms are found, some with unclear etymologies. Existential predication uses inherited báara, negated either with the inherited verb šī ‘not be’ or the Tamasheq loan wörtilla. Locational predication uses either the former verb, as elsewhere in Songhay, or the verbs kéedi ‘be high on’, paralleling Tuareg əwār, and keení ‘lie’; all three are negated with šī. Berber influence has thus significantly restructured the copular system.

As commonly in Berber, indefinite relative clauses directly follow the noun phrase, while definite ones are introduced by a special particle, in this case ayo. Subject relatives, definite or indefinite, show an “extraction marker” na- in place of the usual subject agreement slot, but only if the verb is in the negative or the future, for what Christiansen-Bolli describes as “some unknown reason” (p. 211). In fact, a contact explanation for this seemingly arbitrary distribution appears plausible, as pointed out by Kossmann (2010): in Tamasheq, the phonologically similar masculine singular and general plural participial ending -ǎn, normally suffixed to the verb stem, appears pre-verbally in precisely those two contexts – with negation and with the future (Heath, 2005: 497). As in Tamasheq, prepositions (or at least instrumental/comitative ənda), as well as postpositions, appear immediately after the head noun / relative marker when their complements are relativised upon. Non-restrictive relative clauses use the general-purpose complementiser sa.

Section 4.6 briefly covers the structurally diverse field of negation; while the basic preverbal clitics are retained from Songhay, almost all of the adverbs/particles discussed here are borrowed from, or at least shared with, Tuareg. This is followed by information structure (4.7). The all-purpose complementiser sa turns out to be usable as a topic marker in equational constructions, while other topics – including verbs, through their verbal nouns – are preposed with no special marking. Focus marking is constructed very much like indefinite relative clauses, including the use of the particle na-, which however appears in subject focus with all verbs, not just negative and future ones. Its distribution in this usage does not correlate well to
Tamasheq; as Christiansen-Bolli suggests, this may reflect the influence of the etymologically distinct focus marker no (eg in Gao Songhay, Heath (1999: 221)), which in Gao optionally appears after any fronted focalised constituent, not just subjects, but is obligatory in subject focus with the positive imperfective. Verb focus, like topicalisation, uses verbal nouns. Polar interrogatives normally use either intonation or sentence-initial particles borrowed from Tamasheq. Wh-words are based on two stems: man “where, which”, with both Tuareg and Songhay counterparts, and ci “who, what”, which should be connected to Gao Songhay ma-čin “what?”. Finally, section 4.8 addresses complex sentences and complementisers, including plenty of Berber loans. The rather variable form (əmm)əs-ká(ba)(ha)r “when, if” (p. 256) is etymologically problematic, although the first part is presumably to be connected with Tamajeq ammos ‘if’.

The appendices are almost as valuable as the main body of the text. Appendix I gives two glossed texts – a rather depressing folk-tale starring the ever-hungry amoral trickster Jackal, apparently as popular in Tadaksahak tales as in Berber ones, and a radio broadcast explaining the policy of decentralisation. Appendix II lists verbs of Songhay origin together with their (almost always borrowed) causatives and passives. Appendix III is an all too short English-Tadaksahak word list, based on the Swadesh 200-word list. Appendix IV is a list of 290 Tadaksahak words with Songhay cognates found in dictionaries for Gao or Timbuktu. Not all of these are necessarily inherited: for example, maatíga “peanuts” and táaba ‘tobacco’ are widespread regional words referring to imports introduced relatively late, while baani ‘pod of Acacia nilotica containing tannic acid’ shows irregular correspondences best explained as indicative of a loan from mainstream Songhay (Souag 2012). Moreover, not all the etymologies can be taken at face value: for example, húbut ‘to pull something heavy’ would better be compared to Tamasheq -ǎhobət ‘drag, pull’ than to Gao hibi ‘move over, make room for’, and íifi ‘place sheltered from wind’ to Tamajeq ífi ‘shelter’ than to Gao ífi ‘tree sp.’ Nor should this list be taken as exhaustive; for example, 2pl ándi is found throughout Northern Songhay and is certainly not Berber, but, presumably since it has no obvious cognates outside of that branch, it is excluded from the list. However, it gives a good idea of the size of the Songhay component. It occasionally also suggests frozen morphology, for example the suffix *-ce in támce ‘(former) slave boy’, cp. ťamú ‘(former) slave, male of sub-Saharan origin with nomadic culture’.

Some minor criticisms might be made of the glossing. The consistent glossing of kar even in the sense of ‘except’ (p. 223) as ‘until’, while conforming to the principle of one gloss for one form, is liable to confuse readers. A comparison of some entries to their counterparts in Tuareg dictionaries suggests
potentially confusing imprecision in some glosses, a situation that my own experience suggests is inevitable in fieldwork situations: for example, *laqm*, glossed as 'to strengthen' (p. 9), corresponds to Tamashaq *-allaqqäm-* ‘add more (eg. tea) belatedly’. No doubt such cases will be explained more precisely in the Tadaksahak dictionary on which the author is reportedly working.

**Conclusion.** *A Grammar of Tadaksahak* is a methodical, relatively extensive survey of a hitherto practically undocumented language of extreme interest for the study of language contact. It will be equally useful as a reference for typologists and for anthropologists studying northern Mali and Niger. However, while it gives a rather thorough picture of the Tadaksahak language itself, it gives only a partial picture of the effects of contact with Berber on it; with a handful of exceptions, comparisons with Berber are limited to Tuareg, and the presence of apparently Berber forms with no Tuareg equivalents is left unexplained. It is to be hoped that future research in Northern Songhay will address this gap.

**References**


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